



## **When A Co-Worker Commits Suicide**

The death of a co-worker is almost always a shocking and upsetting occurrence. When a co-worker commits suicide, there are often unanswerable questions as well as complicated grief. People have wide ranging reactions to the suicide of another person. These reactions can range from anger to guilt to sorrow.

Sometimes one may have anticipated the co-worker's actions, while other times the suicide comes as a complete shock. Concern for surviving family members and significant others may become a major concern for surviving co-workers.

This pamphlet is intended to provide you with some information to help you understand some of the reactions people go through in dealing with a co-worker's suicide as well as what you can do to help yourself and your co-workers through the process.

### **Why do People Commit Suicide?**

Although the answer to the question of why a specific person would commit suicide is something that cannot really be answered. There are some explanations that may help to understand someone's actions.

A number of psychiatric conditions have significant depression as one of the characteristics. When depression becomes pervasive enough, some people will begin to feel hopeless and helpless. At times that individual may feel that suicide is the only alternative. Some psychiatric conditions affect the person's ability to think rationally and to control impulses. Sometimes the loss of rational thought coupled with depression can lead a person to think, "The world would be a better place without me." This type of thinking can sometimes develop over time, but with some people can come on rather suddenly.

Serious illness, marital, financial or even work related difficulties can sometimes trigger depressive reactions that can develop into suicidal thoughts. This is not to imply, however that the other parties to the person's difficulties are at fault. Suicide is a deeply personal act that is the responsibility of the person who took his/her own life. The person who committed suicide may or may not have shared their thoughts and feelings with others.

### **Ways People React to the Suicide of a Co-Worker:**

- **Guilt:** Often people develop feelings of guilt surrounding the suicide of a co-worker. These feelings are very normal and common, but are most often not truly justified. A person's decision to commit suicide is so deeply personal, it can be beyond the reach of even the most loving and loyal friend. Even when we know someone is suicidal, we may not be able to stop the person from acting on the desire. It is important to understand that love and caring do not always reach a suicidal individual. Sometimes intense efforts to protect someone from harming himself or herself are unsuccessful. Those who tried to prevent the suicide should try to understand that even psychiatric hospitals with strict suicidal procedures are sometimes unable to stop a person who is truly committed to ending their life. Guilt often arises when the deceased had given either direct or veiled threats to others about their suicidal feelings. Oftentimes people do not take these threats seriously or do not see them for what

they are. This is usually not negligence, but a lack of awareness or understanding of depression and suicide. This lack of understanding is much like when a person does not realize the symptoms of a heart attack or skin cancer.

- **Anger:** It is very common for people to feel angry with the person who committed suicide. This anger may be related to personal or religious beliefs that consider suicide unacceptable. The anger may be due to the impact that the suicide has on the surviving family, friends and co-workers. Oftentimes the anger is mixed with grief and can feel very confusing. Oftentimes the anger decreases with time as the survivors begin to accept the person's death.
- **Sadness:** Intense sadness is a normal part of the grieving process for many people. This sadness can be mixed with guilt and anger and can seem overwhelming.
- **Frustration with not knowing why:** A person's suicide often leaves many questions unanswered. It is very frustrating to not have answers to explain why someone would take their own life. Many surviving family and friends report that they were never able to fully understand why the suicide happened. The lack of understanding often complicates the grieving process.

### **How to Help a Grieving Co-Worker:**

- Allow the person to express their feelings. Grieving people need to work through their feelings and often do by sharing their feelings with others.
- Be non-judgmental of the other person's feelings. Each person has his or her own feelings about death and suicide. It is generally not helpful to push your own feelings at a grieving person.
- If the other person is expressing suicidal feelings of their own strongly encourage them to get immediate help, even contacting their family if necessary, to support them. A person who has been struggling with suicide may either react by feeling that suicide is not as good an idea as they thought, or they may react by feeling that suicide is a real possibility for them.

### **Helping Yourself**

- Ask for support and nurturance from your friends and family. Regardless of the cause of death, someone you know has died.
- Talk out your feelings with people who can be non-judgmental and supportive.
- Seek out your co-workers who are having similar feelings, as they can best understand how you feel.
- Take advantage of supportive services that are made available to you. Group interventions that are designed to help surviving co-workers pull together can be very helpful in understanding each other's feelings.
- Seek additional support if you feel you are having a difficult time coping after the initial shock wears off. If you are currently in treatment for depression or other psychological conditions, it is a good idea to contact your doctor or therapist if you are having trouble handling what has happened. Other supportive services include Employee Assistance Programs, your family doctor, clergy and local grief groups that can be located through your community hospital, hospice or mental health agencies.

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***9199 Reisterstown Road, Suite 105-B, Owings Mills, Maryland 21117***  
***Phone: 410 363-4432    Outside Maryland: 877 661-8070    Fax: 410 356-8299***  
***www.workplacetraumacenter.com***